



Review: 'A Christmas Carol' in Hillsboro -- at first charming, then shrill

By Holly Johnson, Special to The Oregonian

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Scott Palmer, the innovative artistic director of **Bag&Baggage Productions**, has brought new resonance to "A Christmas Carol." By generously dipping into the Victorian novella by Charles Dickens, and also using quotes from the author's diaries, Palmer makes him the central character in his unconventional adaptation of the story in dramatic form at Hillsboro's Venetian Theatre.

At his desk with pen and paper, Dickens (a strong sketch by Tommy Cavanaugh) reasons and argues with his characters, and they respond with rapid-fire, overlapping ideas and inspirations, as together they put together the tale, portraying not just people, but attitudes, emotions, a church bell and even the London fog in the style of Grotowski's theatre of the poor.

Where do these figures come from? They're thoughts and ideas out of Dickens' head, of course, but they soon take on lives of their own, particularly the alpha male of the lot destined to play Scrooge (the magnetic Marion O. Rossi, Jr.), who enters grandly from the upper level of the double-decker stage, commanding everyone's attention (Dickens identified with Scrooge: He felt miserly as he worried about financial debts during the writing of "Carol"). But all the characters are part of him, as we soon observe, as they gather around him, often crowding his space like unruly children. We know how unruly thoughts can be.

The cast moves at a pleasingly rapid pace as they start building the story, idea by idea, character by character. Alan Edward Schwanke's marvelous set design, abundant with doors and windows, also features places on either side to hang props, hats, furniture and set pieces, and the clutter is artfully placed. There's an operatic quality on the large stage as the inanimate objects loom in a dappled light. The fast pacing echoes the clutter as life in Victorian London unfolds around Scrooge's story.

In his version, Palmer, who also directs, has focused on making the show funny, and here's where the problems lie. Granted, Dickens' novella is full of wit and word play ("Couldn't I take 'em all at once, and have it over?" Scrooge asks Marley, referring to the three spirits who will visit him).

At first, the mix of modern language with the novella is charming, the shrill characterizations that border on cartoons and "Saturday Night Live" sketches are fun, and the physical humor delights us: But after awhile, there's too much of it, as if the characters had become quickly drunk on their power to make people laugh. By the time we get to the second act, and Scrooge is undergoing his redemption and transformation, the mood sobers up, thankfully, and Rossi's performance is powerful. But when Scrooge himself finally becomes merry, other characters shift into zany mode once again. It isn't ghosts that haunt this uneven production, it's would-be comedians.

Dickens actually wrote "A Christmas Carol," which was published in 1843, without planning to. A zealous social reformer whose own father had been in debtor's prison, he gave an impassioned speech on the importance of education for the poor to wealthy industrialists in Manchester, and the response was so positive he set out to write a political pamphlet on the subject tentatively titled, "An Appeal to the People of England, on behalf of the Poor



Bag & Baggage
Productions

"A Christmas Carol"

When: Various times and dates through Dec. 22

Where: Venetian Theatre & Bistro, 253 E. Main St., Hillsboro

Tickets: \$12-\$23, 503-516-4840 or www.bagnbaggage.org

Man's Child." But when he sat down at his desk, the holiday novella, which became his most popular work ever, was born.

-- **Holly Johnson**

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